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Where We Miss the Bus in Viet Nam—II

Enemy Made Over 10c

While military operations have been going better than expected in recent months, there has been some doubts as to the prospects of American victory in Viet Nam.

The writer of this series—a resident of Newton and former Army officer—has just returned from Viet Nam where he was working for the United States government in a highly sensitive field. In his daily work Alperin lived with the people of Viet Nam and had close contact with their officials.

By STUART ALAN ALPERIN

Due to the nature of the war being waged in Viet Nam, the common, daily acts of every American in that country will have a greater impact on our current and future relations with the Vietnamese people than all the bombs dropped in Zone D or North Viet Nam.

Nothing could be more tragic than if the United States brought the Vietnamese conflict to an honorable conclusion and yet lost the goodwill of the Vietnamese people.

A great deal has been written and said about the bombing, strafing, and burning of innocent villages and peasants. This remains the tragedy of all wars.

However, even if such "accidents" of war could be halted, there remain the ever-present impressionable actions of the American advisors and combatants.

Gen Westmoreland and his Military Assistance Command Viet Nam (MACV) team have been aware of this important aspect of the war and recently issued a Personal Conduct Card to all American militarymen in Viet Nam, which must always be carried on their person. The card is a reminder that the United States is in South Viet Nam as "guests" of the Vietnamese people.

The issuance of such a card is reminiscent of the Code of Conduct Card issued after the Korean conflict to remind our fighting men how to act should they become prisoners of war.

It is questionable whether this new card will erase the remnants of the "Ugly American" from our representatives in Viet Nam. But it is a positive step in the right direction.

It also proclaims that todays' soldier also must be a diplomat.

The need for such action in South Viet Nam has been great, especially since the buildup of United States forces last Spring. It is a need which permeates all ranks.

Last June a U.S. Army Caribou landed at a central highlands airstrip with a shipment of food, beer, and soft drinks for the local American advisory team's PX and club. When the plane left the area, one can of cola remained on the runway. A Vietnamese soldier ran onto the strip and retrieved the can with a big smile on his face.

Like a bolt of lightning an American major pounced on the Vietnamese soldier and made him give it back.

An Australian advisor, local Vietnamese officials (who spoke English), Vietnamese interpreters, and dozens of Vietnamese soldiers witnessed this display of temper.

Thousands of dollars of American aid and many years of American diplomacy had been washed away for a 10c can of cola.

A Vietnamese captain who had received a French University education in Hanoi and has commanded his present unit for three years made the following observations about the American advisory team effort.

First of all, many American advisors adopt an air of superiority over their Vietnamese counterparts, even if the American officer's rank might be lower than that of the Vietnamese.

Secondly, the Americans often question the professional ability and training of the Vietnamese officer corps, yet, the Vietnamese officer has been trained by his own country, the French, the Australians and the Americans.

He said that one new American advisor was testing him on his knowledge of tracked-vehicles. The question was obviously very elementary and a slur to the Vietnamese captain's competence. After he answered the question, the Vietnamese captain had one for the American. The American could not answer it.

The reason was simple. The American had only attended the basic course at Fort Knox, the U.S Armor School; whereas, the Vietnamese had already graduated the advanced course. Needless to say, the relationship between these two gentlemen remained cool.

Thirdly, the Vietnamese officer has been involved in the war for his entire adult life. He expects a new "advisor" every six to 13 months.

This is probably the young American officer's first combat experience. Too often what the Vietnamese can offer his American "advisor" outweigh the advice he can expect to receive from his American Big Brother.

Finally, although he is physically slight, the intellectual competency of the Vietnamese officer often outweighs that of his advisor. Most Vietnamese officers speak French and English with a high degree of fluency. Many of them have been educated in Europe and the United States. They are astute students of international affairs and are soldier - politician - diplomats.

These are a few of the reasons our American "advisors" are actually "support" officers. Rather than advising, the American has become the liaison officer between the American and Vietnamese military commands.

When the Vietnamese officer cannot get logistical support from his own command, which is most of the time, he can turn to his American "advisors" for helicopters, observation planes, transportation, arms, ammunition, or food.

Although there are many gallants instances where both the professional and social relationship between the American and the Vietnamese is close, this is the exception rather than the rule.

Many special forces teams, Ranger advisors, and MACV personnel are in "the thick of it," with their Vietnamese counterparts. But it is more common to find the American advisor retiring to his French fort for lunch, mid-day siesta, and nightly movie.

One cannot begrudge them for these few comforts when their lives are constantly at stake. However, if the Americans spent more time eating, drinking and relaxing with with their Vietnamese counterparts a great many of the "untalked about" barriers which now exist between our two military teams would disappear.

NEXT—How we're missing propaganda bets.